

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HEALTH DEPARTMENT EXPANDS FISH ADVISORY ON ROANOKE RIVER

(Richmond, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health announced today it is expanding an advisory for people eating six species of fish taken from a 50-mile stretch of the Roanoke River to include 29 additional miles upstream including Altavista to the Leesville Dam. The advisory expansion is based on new information from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) identifying BGF Industries located near Altavista as a likely source of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) contamination in the area.

The health advisory cautions people against eating more than two eight-ounce meals a month of smallmouth bass, channel catfish, flathead catfish, striped bass, white bass and carp from a 79-mile section of the Roanoke River, also known locally as the Staunton River in Southside Virginia. Pregnant women and children are advised not to eat any of these fish.

The 79-mile section now extends from Leesville Dam above Altavista downstream to Clover, Va., at the point where a pipeline intersects Route 803 in Halifax County and where Route 633 in Charlotte County crosses the Roanoke River, which is approximately 5.4 miles below the Route 360 bridge. Formerly, the advisory had begun at Seneca Creek at Route 704 near Long Island. Advisory signs currently are posted along the river from Long Island to the Clover area. New signs will be posted along the 29 additional miles from Long Island upstream to Leesville Dam.

“The health department advises that people should eat no more than two eight-ounce meals per month of these fish species from this 79-mile section of the river,” said Peter C. Sherertz, Ph.D., Acting Director of the Division of Health Hazards Control. “The meal estimates are based on the possibility that eating PCB-contaminated fish may pose a risk to human health,” he said.

Earlier fish sampling results collected by DEQ have shown that PCBs in those species exceeded the health department’s level of concern.

PCBs are a group of man-made industrial chemicals that exist as a mixture and may contain up to 209 individual compounds. Since 1977, PCBs have not been produced in the U.S., but they are still found in the environment. PCBs were once widely used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment.

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Additional testing will be conducted on fish samples taken from the river, according to Sherertz. “The health department will continue to review results and will advise the public as needed,” he said.

Sherertz said the health department recommends the following preparation precautions to reduce any potential harmful effects:

- Eat the smaller, younger fish (within the legal limits). They are less likely to contain harmful levels of PCBs than larger, older fish.
- Remove the skin, fat (from the belly and top of the fish) and internal organs where PCBs are most likely to accumulate before cooking the fish.
- Bake, broil or grill on an open rack to allow fats to drain away from the meat.
- Discard the fats that cook out of the fish.
- Avoid or reduce the amount of fish drippings or broth that are used to flavor the meal. These drippings may contain higher levels of PCBs.
- Eat less deep fried fish, since frying seals PCBs into the fatty tissue.

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